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Does Jesus have a soul? The Apollinarian controversy revisited

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Modern discussion of the soul in the science-religion field tends to assume something of a circular historical narrative, whereby we today are re-discovering something that the people of the Bible knew long ago, namely that the human person is an essential physical unity: mind, brain and body. According to this historical narrative, the idea of the disembodied soul appears in the early church, thanks to the readiness of theologians like Augustine to adopt the dualistic framework prevalent in the Greek-speaking world (e.g. Pannenberg 1994, p. 182). But, like most historical narratives, this is an over-simplification. Belief in the soul was considerably more complex in the early church, and we find some very sophisticated thinking, especially in the Apollinarian controversy of the fourth century CE. This controversy raises important considerations for modern theological discussion on the soul.

The fourth century was marked especially by disputes over the incarnation of Christ, of how (we would say now) God is present in the human Jesus. The problem is, of course, how one person, Jesus Christ, can be both divine and human simultaneously and still remain one being. Apollinarius, Bishop of Laodicea in the second half of the fourth century, found an ingenious solution to unify divine and human, but one which ultimately had him condemned as a heretic. The salient point is that his attempt to achieve a holistic anthropology involved – rather like some of the popular ‘physicalist’ positions in the contemporary debate – denying the soul. Apollinarius’ solution, which made the holistic unity of Christ a key selling point, bequeathed his famous phrase to the later Nestorian controversy, ‘one enfleshed Word of God’. This was the phrase which Cyril of Alexandria – mistakenly thinking that he was quoting from the heroically-orthodox Athanasius – used against Nestorius in the fifth century, with inflammatory results. The debate had moved on since Apollinarius, but his reputation as a heretic lived on. For in the fourth century, Apollinarius had seen the incarnation as literally the enfleshment of the divine Logos, the Word of God. Since the Logos was closely connected in Greek thought with wisdom and the divine intelligence it must have seemed a natural solution to Apollinarius to explain that the Logos, divine mind, *is* the mind of Christ, existing in the human body of Jesus, possessing it, guiding and empowering it, rather like the human soul or mind does in everyone else.

Apollinarius has good motives for denying Jesus of a human soul. First, as we have said, he is concerned to produce a holistic anthropology: to be able to say clearly that Christ the Saviour, God and human, is one physical being, and therefore is able to unite humans with God (Young with Teal 2010 [1983], p. 251). Second, there is the not-inconsiderable matter of sin: Apollinarius believes that Christ cannot save us if he has a human mind or soul, because it is so influenced by sin. Only a Christ who is above us – who does not possess a fallible human soul or mind – can save us. This is what he says:

The Word did not become flesh by taking on a human mind, a mind that is changeable and subject to filthy thoughts, but by being a divine unchangeable heavenly mind (Apollinarius *Ep. ad Diocaesareenses* 2.256.5-7: translation from Spoerl 1998, p.144 n.50.).

In short, Christ needs a divine mind, because only so can he be immune from sin. At this point it is worth flagging up a degree of imprecision: we have tended to speak here of Christ's soul one minute, mind the next. This imprecision reflects Apollinarius' usage himself, since he is rather hard to pin down anthropologically. In some of his works he seems to operate with a basic dichotomist anthropology: the human person is flesh (*sarx*) and spirit (*pneuma*), where the Logos takes the place of spirit; while in other writings he works with a trichotomist anthropology: body (*sōma*), animal soul (*psuchē*) and rational mind (*nous*), where the Logos takes the place of *nous* (Young with Teal 2010 [1983], p. 249; Carter 2011). The reasons for this inconsistency are unclear, although it is perhaps explained by the fact that Apollinarius' dichotomist anthropology simply was not sophisticated enough to handle some of the more subtle soteriological arguments he develops with the trichotomist model. In any case, the salient point for our purposes seems to be that in both anthropologies it is the divine mind, the Logos, which is dominant in Christ, providing supernatural life and motivation. Christ's divine mind is united with human flesh like ours, thinks Apollinarius, and this is how Jesus saves us.

For Apollinarius, the human mind is clearly the most important and the most problematic part of the human condition, as it still is today in our modern debate on consciousness. It is also the point on which criticism of Apollinarius focussed, especially by the two Cappadocian theologians, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa. Both are insistent that Christ must have a human soul or mind. Only by having an entirely human *nous* like ours can Christ save us. Gregory of Nazianzus' famous maxim is famous precisely because it makes this point so effectively:

For that which he has not assumed he has not healed; but that which is united to his Godhead is also saved (Gregory of Nazianzus *Ep.CI*: in Schaff and Wace 1996, p. 440).

In other words, Christ must assume the entire human condition (human soul included) in order to heal it: this is the argument which has gone down in history as the decisive blow against Apollinarius. It is a moot point though, whether this is entirely fair on Apollinarius; the Gregorians are clearly operating with a different soteriology from him; like is not being compared with like (Daley 2002, pp. 478-9). For Apollinarius, it is important that Christ does not share our lowly humanity but is beyond us, so that we can be taken beyond ourselves: for the Gregorians on the other hand, Christ's humanity must be the same as ours, in order to heal what we are now. We might, for that reason, feel that Apollinarius was dealt with rather unfairly by the Gregorians. Perhaps, but the real strength of the Gregorians' position is that they are able to develop a much more holistic soteriology than Apollinarius, because Christ's work of salvation is seen as coming about *through* our humble and lowly humanity, in all its particularity and messiness, and including the soul, not around it or in spite of it.

Sin is central in this, something which tends to be overlooked in the current debate on the soul. Gregory of Nazianzus, writing against Apollinarius, has a particularly useful turn of phrase:

If...[Christ] assumed a body [*sōma*] but left out the mind [*nous*], then there is an excuse for them who sin with the mind (*nous*)...therefore you [Apollinarius] take away the wall of partition [*to mesotoichon*] (Gregory of Nazianzus, *Ep.CI*: in Schaff and Wace 1996, p. 441).

The soul or mind, for Gregory, is the wall of partition (*to mesotoichon*), where sin, conscience – and we might say, consciousness – reside, and through which Christ does his work of redemption on the human condition. Interestingly, *mesotoichon* is an unusual word, but is found prominently in just one place in the New Testament:

For he [Christ] is our peace; he has made both groups one and has broken down the dividing wall [*to mesotoichon*] of partition [*tou phragmou*], that is, the enmity, in his flesh (Ephesians 2:14, author's own translation).

Gregory does not make this connection between his argument and this text from Ephesians obvious, but it is a fascinating piece of wordplay. In Ephesians, the point is that *Christ* has broken down the dividing wall which divides us from each other and from God – sin, hostility, enmity – it is what Christ achieved with the cross and resurrection. But in Gregory it is *Apollinarius* who has done this, not Christ. And Apollinarius has not broken down the dividing wall, he has taken it away altogether, so that it is no longer there for Christ to break down. Apollinarius is effectively an anti-Christ, spiriting-away the dividing wall – the human soul or mind – so that Christ has nothing left to break down, no way to deal with sin. Gregory points out, then, that the mind is the crucial battle ground for sin and for salvation: the human condition has to have it. And he makes this even more pointedly in his next challenge:

They [the Apollinarians] who take away the Humanity and the Interior Image [the soul of Christ] cleanse by their newly-invented mask only our outside, and that which is seen (Gregory of Nazianzus, *Ep.CII*: in Schaff and Wace 1996, p. 444).

This raises an interesting point to consider for those who support the modern physicalist thesis: by de-emphasising the soul, are we reducing the human condition merely to 'that which is seen', only allowing the outside of the person to be cleansed? Whatever we make of the mind or the soul today, we must not ignore sin (i.e. that which is unseen physically) in the theological picture. Certainly, Gregory's view of salvation sees as vital that which is unseen, the mind or soul, which was the 'first to be affected' by sin, he says, thinking of Adam (*Ep.CI*: in Schaff and Wace 1996, p. 441). Above all then, Christ must take on the human mind and heal it. The mind or soul is the main locus of healing: the dividing wall.

There is one final question which is of some importance: how dualistic are these thinkers on the soul? That is perhaps most easily answered by looking at the other Gregory – Gregory of Nyssa – who wrote a lengthy treatise on this very issue. Gregory of Nyssa's anthropology is complex, and difficult to cohere. To some degree, he looks like a dualist. For example, he contrasts the 'rare and peculiar' nature of the soul with the 'gross texture' of the body, even to the extent that he describes the soul as independent of the body:

And our conception of it [the soul] is this; that it exists, with a rare and peculiar nature of its own, independently of the body with its gross texture (Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*: in Schaff and Wace 1994, p. 433).

But in making this statement, it is not clear that we can accuse Gregory of Nyssa of full-blown dualism, at least not of the Cartesian kind. For Gregory, the soul exists along with the body: even after death, when the body is dissolved into its constituent atoms and scattered far and wide, the soul remains with each atom, and is the means by which they are re-assembled at the resurrection of the dead (Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*: in

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Schaff and Wace 1994, pp. 445-446; *The Great Catechism* VIII, XVI: in Schaff and Wace 1994, pp. 483, 489). But between death and resurrection, it is as though the soul is dormant.

According to Gregory of Nyssa, then, the soul is intimately associated with the physical body, and is inseparable from it even after death, but it is nevertheless not reducible to the body. He says this:

The soul is an essence created, and living, and intellectual, transmitting from itself to an organised and sentient body the power of living and of grasping objects of sense, as long as a natural constitution capable of this holds together (Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*: in Schaff and Wace 1994, p. 433).

Such a statement is not a million miles from the modern perspective known as ‘non-reductive physicalism’, where the entire human person (including the soul) can be described biologically, but cognitive (and presumably spiritual) states are emergent from it (Brown *et al.* 1998). As Malcolm Jeeves puts it: ‘According to this view, we regard mental activity as embodied in brain activity rather than as being *identical with* brain activity’ (Jeeves 1998, p. 89). And certainly Gregory can be read as proposing the soul as a kind of emergent property, describing the continual becoming of the soul – its metaphorical ascent towards God – as a process which takes place both in this earthly body and in the resurrection body. This process of becoming is his great vision of emerging holiness known as *epektasis*, which provides a narrative of continuous reaching-out towards God in this life and the next.

But Gregory of Nyssa highlights the great uncertainty behind all of this. If we wish to understand the soul more deeply, and how it is joined with the body, we simply cannot, is Gregory’s message. The soul is completely mysterious, rather like the union between God and human in Christ, or like the making of the original creation (Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism* XI: in Schaff and Wace 1994, p. 486). The soul is what we today would call the causal link, but it is beyond our ken.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that the two Gregorys’ approach to the soul as the causal link, or the dividing wall, is particularly helpful in our modern theological discussions on the role and status of the soul. The soul cannot be reduced to biology, in the same way that theological concepts such as sin cannot be reduced to biology; nevertheless, they are compatible with biology. The Gregorys see the soul as the bridge between ontology and epistemology, especially when soteriology is in view. In rather simpler terms, this means that the soul – the rational mind – is the mysterious but emerging theatre of being and of knowing, of knowing Christ and of becoming Christ-like, but the soul is by no means disconnected from the body since it arises entirely through an emergent process. At the same time, the soul is the theatre of *opposition* to knowing Christ: it is the dividing wall, the location of sin, that theological concept which is as elusive as the soul is elusive.

In short, the soul is human life, mind in body, in ascent towards God (and descent away from God through sin). This view does not conflict with the physicalist approach, since it essentially functions as a metaphor which adds a richly theological perspective to the physicalist approach; in fact, this view resists the tendency of metaphysical naturalism to reduce the richness of the human condition altogether to science, while it remains compatible with science.

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